Assessing and Recognizing Foreign Credentials in Canada — *Employers' Views*

Prepared for Citizenship and Immigration Canada and Human Resources Development Canada

In consultation with the Canadian Chamber of Commerce

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The assessment and recognition of the education credentials of foreign-trained workers is an issue of growing importance in Canada. An accurate understanding and evaluation of the skills, knowledge and experience of foreign-trained workers plays a key role in enabling these workers to find jobs in which this preparation can be used to full advantage. When this happens, the individual benefits from earnings in keeping with his/her skills, and the employer and economy benefit from the full productive use of those skills. When this does not happen, the full productive potential of the labour force goes unrealized, and the affected individuals and their families suffer lower incomes and standards of living. Businesses and individuals suffer; the country suffers.

Over the last several years, the growing threat of skill shortages has lent increasing importance to the need to fully use the skills of the Canadian labour force, regardless of where these skills were obtained. In turn, this has made it more and more important that the qualifications of foreign-trained workers be fully and accurately evaluated, so that they can be most effectively used.

In this context, in September 2000, the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC) was contracted by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) to undertake a project to engage Canadian employers[1] in preliminary discussions around two issues, namely:

1. Business experiences with issues and processes related to recognition of foreign credentials, and their implications for further government approaches in this area, and

2. Communicating with the business community to raise awareness of and interest in foreign credential recognition issues, including promotion of provincially-mandated credential assessment services.

The focus of the work was on credentials assessment issues, as distinct from other immigration-related concerns highlighted by employers.

In carrying out this project between October 2000 and January 2001, the CLBC interviewed, by telephone, a selection of 25 employer representatives, government representatives, and representatives of provincial credentials-assessment services. The interviews explored employers' views and experiences with assessing and recognizing the credentials of foreign-trained workers, as well as approaches to raising the awareness of employers on these subjects.

This report summarizes the project findings.

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[1] These employers were to be identified with the consultation and assistance of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

Employers' Practices in Assessing Foreign Credentials

Canadian employers use a wide variety of approaches to assess the education and experience credentials of foreign-trained candidates. These differences in approaches reflect the skills/occupations being sought, as well as the employer's sector.

Employers recruiting in occupations and professions which require formal certification or licensing had the clearest education recognition requirements, since these were governed by provincial certifying/licensing agencies. In other occupations, however, employers' practices in assessing paper credentials varied enormously. Some took these credentials at face value, some used the credentials assessment services of universities or provincially mandated credentials assessment agencies, while others consulted with informal networks of individuals from specific countries, who were familiar with the granting institutions in those countries.

A number of interviewed employers, however, stressed relevant experience over paper credentials. In the high-tech sector, for example, labour demand is so tight that employers focus primarily on relevant experience and on-the-job demonstration of skills and competence, as well as English competence, to find a candidate who is immediately productive.

Some firms and sectoral organizations had developed occupational standards against which anyone, whether foreign- or Canadian-trained, can be assessed in a transparent manner. The principles of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) were a strong feature of these innovative approaches.

Employer Concerns in Foreign Credentials Assessment

Employer concerns varied widely, and included the following key points:

1. In several professions in the health and engineering field where provincial or federal licensing bodies grant formal professional recognition, there was a strong sense among interviewed employers that the licensing processes were too restrictive.

   One Ontario employer, in this connection, wondered whether the provincial certification agencies in various professions would be required to use the new provincial credentials assessment agency, or whether they would continue to use their own resources to check paper credentials. If the latter, this raised questions about why two parallel mechanisms would co-exist.

   This same employer also asked whether thought had been given to developing a master reference database for provincial credentials assessment agencies.

2. Several employers, including some in engineering and health, were concerned that immigrants leave their home countries without accurate information about the occupational certification practices they will face when they come to Canada. Preparation and counseling of immigrants in their home country about these realities is thus an important requirement, to avoid disillusionment.

3. Allowing immigrants to self-assess their credentials before immigrating, either via a web site or related tool, was a theme raised more than once. Such a process, under development in some professions in some provinces, can help prospective immigrants determine where their credentials fit in Canadian terms, and provide a realistic picture of what they will encounter in Canada.

4. In the view of some employers, the current immigration points rating system puts too much weight on paper credentials and not enough on experience. This in turn raises the issue of how such experience can be accurately assessed, and highlights the potential role of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in this regard.

5. In provinces where provincial credentials assessment agencies existed, some employers contacted were not aware of them. In Ontario, where such an agency has recently begun operating, there was a feeling among responding employers that the service would be valuable. Nevertheless, for the new service in Ontario as with others, publicity and promotion to employers posed a key initial challenge.

Communicating with the Business Community on Foreign Credentials Assessment

Those promoting the services of credentials assessment agencies to the business community need to take into account the variation in employers' reliance on credentials assessment, and in their practices in this regard. This suggests that the most effective marketing efforts for these agencies might be ones that are targeted at particular sectors or employer groups most likely to (i) recruit foreign-trained workers and (ii) attach importance to candidates' paper credentials.

These communications would stress (i) that it makes good business sense to hire foreign-trained workers, and (ii) that using provincial credentials assessment agencies also makes good business sense by broadening the pool of qualified candidates, while reducing the costs of recruitment interviews, probationary trial periods, and similar activities.

Such a promotional process might nevertheless have to begin, however, with a relatively broad-brush approach to the employer community, perhaps through associations of human resources professionals. Subsequently, partnerships with appropriate sectoral employer associations or sector councils would help maintain communications between the employers and the assessment agencies.

The resources involved in these promotion efforts, however, should not be underestimated. Constant turnover among human resources professionals and recruiters in larger employers, and the continuing entry and exit of small businesses, mean that regular or even repetitive contacts are required.

Securing Employers' Advice on Credentials Issues

As skill shortages worsen and the need to use available skills most productively increases, the interests of employers in the effectiveness of credentials assessment and recognition processes should become more acute. Governments are challenged to find a way to engage the employer community in discussions of these issues in a way that suits

both. Further complicating the issue is the need to distinguish the credentials assessment issues from the other regulatory, administrative, and 'red tape' issues on which employers often express concern.

As has been noted, employers, for a variety of reasons, have not come forward in large numbers to provide advice to governments on credentials recognition policies or practices. Ongoing, open-ended employer advisory groups will not be attractive to potential employer participants. Rather, an approach that is focussed on a problem which employers perceive to be real, and is finite in terms of time commitment, may stand a better chance of attracting participants. Soliciting the advice, assistance and nominations of employer organizations, on these terms, can facilitate the process.

Further Research

A more extensive consultation with employers on credentials assessment issues would deepen governments' understanding not only of what the issues are, but also of the breadth, depth, and details of employers' concerns, beyond those outlined in this project. Such research might focus on the particular concerns of employers in specific sectors in which credentials assessment issues are a relative priority, and might be undertaken with the collaboration of the relevant sector employers' associations and/or sector councils, where appropriate.

To identify these sectors, however, might involve some initial broader-brush approaches, perhaps through provincial human resources professionals or recruiters' associations, or credentials assessment services. It is also clear that the intensity of further research on these issues would vary geographically, focusing on those regions with a larger immigrant population.

Assessing and Recognizing Foreign Credentials in Canada – Employers' Views

I. Background

Importance of Foreign Credentials Assessment and Recognition

The assessment and recognition of the education credentials of foreign-trained workers is an issue of growing importance in Canada. An accurate understanding and evaluation of the skills, knowledge and experience of foreign-trained workers plays a key role in enabling these workers to find jobs in which this preparation can be used to full advantage. When this happens, the individual benefits from earnings in keeping with his/her skills, and the employer and economy benefit from the full productive use of those skills. When this does not happen, the full productive potential of the labour force goes unrealized, and the affected individuals and their families suffer lower incomes and standards of living. Businesses and individuals suffer; the country suffers.

Over the last several years, the growing threat of skill shortages has lent increasing importance to the need to fully use the skills of the Canadian labour force, regardless of where these skills were obtained. In turn, this has made it more and more important that the qualifications of foreign-trained workers be fully and accurately evaluated, so that they can be most effectively used.

From a governmental perspective, the assessment of foreign qualifications has been part of the larger issue of ensuring and facilitating access to professions and trades. This issue has included other key dimensions such as ensuring interprovincial labour mobility under Chapter 7 of the Agreement on Internal Trade.

From an employers' point of view, credentials assessment and recognition may be one of a number of immigration-related issues which affect their ability to recruit the skills they need. Immigration regulations and administrative procedures, or practices in posts abroad, are among the other concerns which employers raise in this connection.

Focus of this Study

1. In this context, in September 2000, the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC) was contracted by Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) and Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) to undertake a project to engage Canadian employers[2] in introductory discussions around two issues, namely:

    i) Business experiences with issues and processes related to recognition of foreign credentials, and their implications for further government approaches in this area; and

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[2] These employers were to be identified with the consultation and assistance of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

ii) Communicating with the business community to raise awareness of and interest in foreign credential recognition issues, including promotion of provincially-mandated credential assessment services.

The focus of the work was on credentials assessment issues, as distinct from other immigration-related concerns highlighted by employers.

In carrying out this project between October 2000 and January 2001, the CLBC interviewed, by telephone, a selection of 25 employer representatives, government representatives, and representatives of provincial credentials-assessment services. (The sectoral distribution of interviewed employers is listed in Annex 1; a list of other organizations consulted and contacted during the project appears as Annex 2.)

In addition, CLBC solicited broader employer feedback on these issues through:

- An electronic mail survey of members of a municipal Chamber of Commerce's Human Resources Committee (50 members);
- An electronic mail survey of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce's corporate members and 350 local chambers;
- An insert in the newsletter of a municipal Human Resources Management Association (400 recipients);
- Insertion of the issue of credentials recognition on the agenda of meetings of several local chapters of human resource professionals associations.

The following report summarizes the key observations and conclusions from these various contacts.

II. Introductory Comments

Business's views on the assessment and recognition of foreign credentials are an enormously complex subject. The credentials assessment issues, concerns, and practices of a hospital in Vancouver, for example, will be very different from those of a high-tech firm in Kanata or a bank in Toronto. Capturing the full set of complexities on this question would require an extensive process of consultation and information-gathering, which were beyond the mandate of this project.

Rather, this project undertook to conduct a relatively small number of interviews (25) in a wide array of sectors and regions of Canada. Its conclusions and observations must therefore be seen as impressionistic rather than as statistically rigorous. Taken together, however, they highlight a number of important themes or issues, which may warrant further exploration by governments and other agencies active in this area. They also add to the relatively limited amount of work done to date on employers' views of credentials

recognition issues and processes[3], and must be seen as a further exploration of these issues, rather than as a definitive statement.

It is also instructive to note at the outset the difficulty the researcher experienced in identifying employers to interview for this project. In a number of cases, the researcher used broadly-based approaches to identify potential interviewees. These included the e-mails and phone calls to employer groups, chambers of commerce, and provincial and local chapters of human resources professionals associations, which have been listed above in Section I. In these approaches, employer representatives with particular concerns or experiences in the area of foreign credentials assessment were asked to self-identify and share their experiences. Of the over 800 employer organizations contacted in this manner, none responded. It was evident from the lack of employer self-response to these approaches that the issue is not a burning one for most.

In contrast, approaches which used the contacts and networks of immigration-related agencies were generally more successful in locating employers with 'a story to tell'.

It is apparent that only a minority of employers encounter situations where they must assess foreign credentials, and of these, only a further minority feel strongly enough about their experience to take the time to share it. Such employers would be most likely to appear on the lists of immigration-related agencies.

These difficulties appear to demonstrate an important contradiction. For employers as a broad group, credentials assessment is not a continuing high priority concern. However, when an individual employer is having current problems hiring a foreign-trained worker, immigration issues become a primary and immediate concern.

This situation would appear to be consistent with that faced by governments and provincially mandated credentials assessment agencies who must try to 'get the attention' of the employer community at large regarding credentials assessment issues.

It remains the case that for every immigrant who fails to get a job which fully recognizes his/her credentials, there is also an employer who fails to fill a vacancy. In most cases, the employer is unaware that there is an immigrant who, in other circumstances, could fill that vacancy. The employer suffers directly from the immigrant's lack of credentials recognition, but is unaware if it.

Employers thus have an important interest in the success of the credentials assessment process, yet this interest is not reflected or articulated in a formal way. There is no association of such employers; no place where employers who encounter credentials assessment difficulties can assemble to persuade governments, certification agencies and

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[3] Some of the most comprehensive work done in this regard has been associated with the creation of provincial credentials-assessment agencies. For example, the Foreign Academic Credential Assessment Services Business Assessment, conducted for the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation by Price Waterhouse in 1998, covers issues related to employer demand for a credentials assessment service (pages 2-10 to 2-14).

others to make needed changes. As one report puts it, employers are an 'amorphous group'[4], whose varied experiences are difficult to summarize.

This overall perception of the generally low importance which employers as a group place on immigration is reflected in other research undertaken by the Canadian Labour and Business Centre (CLBC).

Specifically, in a CLBC survey[5] of public and private sector employers and labour leaders in early 2000, respondents were asked to rate the seriousness of a number of national-level issues facing the economy. These issues included taxation, government deficits, skill shortages, education quality, immigration levels, and others. Of twenty-five issues listed, Immigration Levels ranked dead last among employers in terms of the perceived seriousness of the issue; between 10% and 15% of employer respondents viewed Immigration Levels as a 'serious problem'. Similarly, fewer than 20% of responding employers felt that greater emphasis should be given to increasing immigration. Employers held these views despite the fact that they ranked Skill Shortages among the top five most serious issues facing the economy.

The survey thus implied that, as a whole, employers have not strongly linked immigration and skill shortages, or fully noted the contribution of the former in addressing the latter.

The following report is conscious of this 'disconnect'. The fact that employers as a group suffer from the effects of an imperfect credentials assessment system, yet have not raised this with governments as an important issue, would appear to be something of an irony. As anticipated labour shortages intensify in coming years, however, it will be increasingly necessary to tap the full skill potential of all labour force members, regardless of where they have trained. Credentials assessment issues will become more urgent, and it will be essential to involve the employer community in this. It is hoped that the results of these interviews help shed some light on this perplexing problem.

III. Overall Observations and Conclusions from Employer Interviews

This section summarizes the broad conclusions and observations from the employer interviews. More detailed interview results, on a sectoral/occupational basis, are presented in Section IV. The topics covered in the employer interviews are listed in Annex 4. During the project, interviews were also conducted with provincially mandated credentials assessment agencies in two provinces. These are separately summarized in Annex 3.

Employers' Practices in Assessing Foreign Credentials

When faced with the need to assess the paper and experience credentials of foreign-trained candidates, the Canadian employers interviewed cited a wide variety of

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4 Andrew Brouwer, Immigrants Need Not Apply, The Maytree Foundation, Toronto, 1999, page 9.

5 Canadian Labour and Business Centre, Viewpoints 2000, Ottawa, June 2000, Charts 2(a) and 2(b).

approaches, which are described at greater length in Section IV. These approaches largely depended upon the skills/occupations being sought, which in turn often reflected important sectoral differences. Employers were a far from homogeneous group in their views and experiences regarding foreign credentials assessment.

For some (but by no means all) employers, paper credentials were important in recruitment decisions. Clearest in this regard were the practices of employers who hired in occupations and professions requiring formal certification and licensing. These employers looked for this certification, and where it was missing, referred candidates to provincial certifying/licensing agencies.

In other non-certified occupations, employers' practices in assessing paper credentials varied enormously. Some, either as a matter of policy or because checking paper credentials was too difficult, took these credentials at face value. Others used the credentials assessment services of universities or of provincially mandated credentials assessment agencies, where these existed. Still others used informal networks of individuals from specific countries, who could comment in an informed way on the quality of candidates' degrees/diplomas, based on their familiarity with the granting institutions in those countries. One high-tech employer used the services of immigration lawyers to assess both the level of candidates' credentials and their veracity. (It is apparent that many of the approaches which relied on the views and opinions of individuals raised issues of consistency and objectivity.)

For a number of interviewed employers, however, the stress was less on paper credentials than on relevant experience. For these employers, the issue was how to translate foreign experience into Canadian terms.

In this case, the importance of assessing the paper credentials of foreign-trained immigrants seemed to disappear where the labour market is extraordinarily tight. In the high-tech sector, for example, labour demand is such that employers are prepared to focus primarily on relevant experience and on-the-job demonstration of skills and competence, as well as English competence. Here, the stress is on finding someone who is immediately productive. Among firms that hired out engineers on contract, similar approaches existed.

The interviews included three firms or sectoral organizations that had gone even further in establishing competency-based assessment processes for their workforces as a general business practice, independent of immigration considerations. These innovative organizations, for the most part, had developed occupational standards against which anyone, whether foreign- or Canadian-trained, can be assessed in a transparent manner. In the sectoral organization, the assessment was self-administered using a website, which made the approach highly cost-effective.

The principles of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) are explicitly applied in some of these examples, and are a strong feature of the innovative approaches described. One interviewee noted that the Ontario Government may also consider an

approach, with PLAR features, for helping to recognize the experience of foreign-trained physicians.

Employer Concerns in Foreign Credentials Assessment

As noted earlier, it appeared from the research that the vast majority of employers do not have a particularly high level of awareness of immigration issues, and even less with credentials assessment questions. Those employers with opinions to share generally had first-hand experience of immigration issues, and these varied widely, reflecting their own experience.

In several professions in the health and engineering field where provincial or federal licensing bodies grant formal professional recognition, there was a strong sense among some employers that the licensing processes were too restrictive. Five interviewees described their frustration with these agencies' practices, noting in some cases the steps that they had had to take to deal with these, in order to successfully recruit candidates. While the coverage of employers and professions in these areas could not be exhaustive, there is clearly in many areas a real concern on this subject.

In provinces where provincial credentials assessment agencies existed, some employers contacted were not aware of them. This sampling, while very limited, nevertheless confirmed the views of the credentials assessment agencies themselves, that promoting awareness of their services is an important priority. In Ontario, where such an agency has recently begun operating, there was a feeling among responding employers who had to assess paper credentials that the service would be valuable. In particular, it would provide another basis for judging qualifications and would reduce costs associated with recruitment, orientation training, and candidates' probationary periods.

Nevertheless, for the new service in Ontario as with others, publicity and promotion to employers posed a key initial challenge[6].

One Ontario employer, however, wondered whether the provincial certification agencies in various professions would be required to use this new provincial credentials assessment agency, or whether they would continue to use their own resources to check paper credentials. If the latter, this raised questions about why two parallel mechanisms would co-exist. This same employer also asked why it would be cost-effective to have several provincial services operating in parallel, rather than a single national service with a single master reference database.

There was a concern in several sectors, including engineering and health, that immigrants leave their home countries without accurate information about the occupational

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[6] It may be interesting to note, in this connection, that during the course of this project, the researcher was able to put the Ontario credentials assessment service in contact with representatives of the provincial association of human resources professionals, to organize a promotional seminar. As this report was being written, that seminar was under discussion and development.

certification practices they will face when they come to Canada. Many immigrants, having received the necessary points to come to Canada and believing as a result that their skills are needed, are dismayed or even disillusioned by the certification practices they find they must work through in order to actually practice a profession. Preparation and counseling of immigrants in their home country is thus a major concern, and there is an opportunity for collaboration between government and certifying agencies in this regard.

Two respondents also suggested in this connection that the current immigration points rating system puts too much weight on paper credentials and not enough on experience. This in turn raises the issue of how such experience can be accurately assessed, and highlights the potential role of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in this regard. The cited examples of how some firms use PLAR in broad employee assessment activities identifies the use of PLAR methods in assessment processes, as a further potential employer-related issue, albeit one that was not explored at length in this project.

Similarly, allowing immigrants to self-assess their credentials before immigrating, either via a web site or related tool, was a theme raised more than once. Such a process, under development in some professions in some provinces, can help prospective immigrants determine where their credentials fit in Canadian terms, and provide a realistic picture of what they will encounter in Canada. In a related example, one innovative construction sector proposal featured a screening of candidates in their home countries prior to receiving Canadian work visas. Similarly, the web-based self-assessment approach of one sector council constituted a potentially useful example of a service available to prospective immigrants.

Communicating with the Business Community on Foreign Credentials Assessment

It is evident, from the views of both employers and provincial credentials assessment agencies, that promoting the services of these agencies to the business community is an important step. Yet it would also appear that because of the variation in employers' reliance on credentials assessment, and in their practices in this regard, a blanket advertising campaign risks falling on many deaf ears. (For example, based on our interviews with high-tech employers, below, promoting credentials assessment services would likely not have a high resonance in that sector.[7])

In sectors where the professions involved are strictly licensed by provincial accreditation bodies, employers might want to understand whether the licensing bodies were using the services of the provincial assessment agencies and if not, why not. These employers, however, would presumably have less need to understand the mechanics of using the

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[7] The High-Tech sector, of course, has been extensively involved with other immigration-related issues, which have related more to regulatory and administrative questions. These have contributed, among other things, to the initiation of a program to facilitate the entry of temporary foreign workers in the software development field.

provincial credentials assessment agencies themselves, since they would not be the direct users of these services.

These observations suggest that the most effective marketing efforts for the provincial assessment agencies might be ones that are targeted at particular sectors or employer groups most likely to (i) recruit foreign-trained workers and (ii) attach importance to candidates' paper credentials. These sets of employers might be similar across jurisdictions, so an interprovincial exchange of experience would obviously be useful. In other cases, these employer groups might self-identify over time.

Partnerships with appropriate sectoral employer associations or sector councils, where appropriate, would help maintain communications between the employers and the assessment agencies. The key to these communications would be to prove to employers (i) that it makes good business sense to hire foreign-trained workers, and (ii) that using provincial credentials assessment agencies also makes good business sense by broadening the pool of qualified candidates, while reducing the costs of recruitment interviews, probationary trial periods, etc. Such a promotional process might nevertheless have to begin, however, with a relatively broad-brush approach to the employer community, perhaps through associations of human resources professionals.

Finally, there is the question of whether or how to establish ongoing employer attention on credentials assessment issues, in the face of a wide variation in awareness, attitudes and practices regarding credentials assessment across the employer community. Relatively few employers, particularly small employers, will be prepared to commit the time to ongoing consultative bodies with such a specific, even limited, focus. On a much broader economic front, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce has maintained for some years an active interest in reducing interprovincial barriers that restrict the movement of workers. Credentials assessment issues are a subset of these, and might be included within them.

IV. Employer Interviews – Specific Issues by Sector

Our interviews suggested that on the whole, relatively few employers have direct exposure to the need to assess foreign credentials. In provinces with relatively few immigrants, for example, the immigrant market is small and contacts with immigrant job candidates relatively few. In provinces with more immigrants, employers' direct need to assess immigrants' foreign credentials themselves can be reduced by a number of circumstances, which include the following:

- Immigrants may have already had their credentials assessed, at their own expense, either as a general preparation or in the process of seeking qualification from a provincial professional or technical regulatory body.

- In particular fields, especially medical professions, the requirements for certification are clear. Employers refer candidates to the relevant certifying body, and will generally not consider individuals lacking that certification.

- The importance of specific credentials will vary depending upon the employer's sector and on the nature of the occupation(s) in which the employer is trying to recruit. Thus, where the academic prerequisites for a job are relatively low (as in the oil industry), or the skills and experience sought are highly specific (as in some high-tech jobs), academic credentials may not be too important.

Where employers do require a direct assessment of an applicant's foreign credentials, the circumstances will vary significantly. Their experience with the process, and their resulting observations, vary accordingly. The following paragraphs relate these experiences, grouping employers by sector or occupational group, since these appear to be important determinants of their experience.

1. The IT Sector

Our interviews with IT sector employers indicated clearly that paper credentials are not perceived as the most important feature of a candidate's qualifications. Rather, because of the extraordinarily tight labour market in this sector, the stress is on priority characteristics, which a potential employee must have, to be immediately useful to an employer in a rapidly changing market environment. These include:

- English communication skills (to be able to function as a team member).
- Work experience that is relevant to the needs of the employer. (Specific technologies or projects completed). Technologies can change in six months, so immigration posts must keep aware of these changes.
- Work environment and work ethic from home country must be comparable to Canada's.
- Education background. Credentials are rarely if ever verified by the company or its employer clients. Most applicants have a degree, and this is usually seen as enough.

In IT, the approach of many employers was that the individual, having met the basic requirements, would be put to work. It would become clear in a month or two whether the person could do the job.

In the rare cases where paper credentials must be assessed, employers' practices vary considerably, as follows:

- A number of large employers in the IT sector regularly recruit directly from overseas and maintain staff dedicated to the recruitment process. The recruitment staff are knowledgeable about the institutions in the source countries (often being nationals of those countries), and can directly assess how a diploma or degree relates to Canadian requirements and, in some cases, whether a document is in fact genuine. These companies, experienced

in foreign recruitment, are able to move prospective immigrants through the immigration 'process' more quickly than smaller companies which are less experienced with foreign recruitment processes. Often, the latter rely on immigration consultants for help in this regard.

- Some smaller employers have used the same approach on an ad hoc basis, drawing on the knowledge of a consultant who is a national of the country in which a recruitment activity is under way.

- Immigration lawyers are used by some firms to check the validity of foreign credentials and the specific courses, fields, etc., relevant to the client employer.

- Some firms have a policy of accepting foreign credentials at par with Canadian ones, if the source country is one well-known as a good skill source.

- Others, however, are not prepared to do so, arguing that in many countries the technologies candidates learn during their education are less current than in Canada, which reduces the equivalency of degrees and diplomas from those countries.

- Still others will use the resources of provincial credentials assessment services or, where these are unavailable, similar university services.

Some employers interviewed from the IT sector expressed concern that experience tended to be undervalued in immigrant selection processes, and paper credentials overvalued. To these employers, a rebalancing would facilitate overseas recruitment.

Others stressed the importance of English language skills, noting that they employ consultants in-house to assist with these. One suggested that IT employers in his community might jointly fund an English language facility if someone would take the initiative to promote it.

2. Medical Professions

Those interviewed in the medical field noted the clear processes of certification that apply for medical professions, and cited the roles of the relevant Colleges in this regard. Where immigrant candidates approached health employers for jobs, they were referred back to the Colleges for certification if they did not have this. From an employer viewpoint, the process is very clear.

Some employers, however, expressed frustration with what they perceived as overly restrictive practices used by the certification bodies. In employers' view, many such bodies grant far too little credit for foreign training, or have residency, internship or other requirements, which greatly restrict immigrant candidates' access to certification. Frustration with these practices was intensified since most employers faced shortages of

various health professionals and at the same time were aware of uncertified immigrants trained in these fields who, if they could be certified, might fill important vacancies.

The specific health professions covered in the interviews included physicians, radiation therapists, and pharmacists. Employers' concerns about perceived restrictive licensing practices, while differing in details among these professions, were common in their basic theme. In addition, in the case of pharmacists, concern was also expressed that, despite employers' efforts, the profession had not been included on the HRDC list of shortage occupations as a basis for granting immigration points. This, in employers' view, added further difficulty to the foreign recruitment process.

Several examples of these difficulties were identified, together with innovative efforts by various stakeholders in different jurisdictions to address them. These are as follows:

(i) Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan health employers have difficulty attracting to the province health professionals in specialties which are in extreme shortage, whose practitioners have virtually unlimited choice of potential destinations. This recruitment difficulty is worsened if foreign-trained candidates must then go through the full certification process in their field.

In the case of physicians, this certification involves writing the exams of the Royal College of Canada. For physicians, however, some Saskatchewan health employers have secured the agreement of the Royal College of Physicians of Saskatchewan to permit foreign-trained professionals from certain Commonwealth countries and the United States to work in Saskatchewan without this Royal College of Canada certification. These are ministerial exemptions and are granted on a case-by-case basis. This enhances the movement of professionals to Saskatchewan, although without the Royal College of Canada certification they cannot work anywhere else in Canada.

Similarly, in the area of radiation therapists, Saskatchewan employers have been able to get the agreement of the national licensing body to bring in radiation therapists, allowing them to write the Canadian licensing exams at the next available opportunity. This effectively speeds up the immigration process, by avoiding the delays of requiring the prospective immigrant to write the licensing exams before emigrating.

(ii) Ontario

Interviews in Ontario noted that the key problem facing foreign-trained physicians is not the strictness of the certification process, but rather the issue of access to the certification exams themselves. This access depends on the number of residencies granted to foreign-trained physicians by the Ontario Health Ministry. Currently, there are 36 residencies available to foreign-trained candidates, and over 200 candidates will write the exams in early December to compete for these positions.

The number of residencies is affected by the capacity of the teaching hospitals to manage and oversee them. Increasing the number of practicing physicians in the province also

will increase health costs since each will receive an OHIP billing number. Nevertheless, interviewees suggest that there is room for an expansion in the number of residencies for the foreign-trained candidates, particularly since the Ontario Government itself has cited a growing shortage of physicians in the province.

Interviews also noted that the Ontario Health Ministry is considering an innovative PLAR approach, under which foreign-trained physicians with sufficient foreign experience and who have written the necessary Canadian qualifying exams can avoid the residency requirement altogether. This would involve a six-month assessment in a clinical environment, which, if successful, would be followed by a recommendation that the individual be allowed to write the certification exams. For successful candidates this would significantly accelerate the process of finding work.

3. Trades

a. Apprenticeships

Employers seeking candidates for apprenticeships will want to ensure that individuals have the equivalent of high school education in relevant subjects. At this entry level, adequate educational credentials are an important requirement. This is an area in which provincial credentials assessment agencies have been active, and in these cases the assessment tends to be relatively straightforward.

b. Journeypersons

In compulsorily certified trades, journeyperson certification exams are administered by provincial governments, not by employers or unions. The process, for compulsory certified trades, is clear and understood by all parties.

In addition to the traditional apprenticeship route to becoming a journeyperson, individuals can directly challenge the certification exam if they can demonstrate that they have the necessary work experience. This applies to both immigrants and domestically trained people.

Immigrants' work experience must be documented or sworn, in an appropriate format, before the immigrant tradesperson can challenge the certification exam. If the individual has performed appropriate tasks for an adequate period of time, it is assumed that he/she has been exposed to a broad range of problems. He/she can then challenge the exam.

In non-compulsory trades, employers, particularly industrial employers, can hire individuals without certification. They will usually require, at a minimum, certificates of theoretical training. It is in dealing with these non-compulsory trades and other industrial occupations that employers have had to deal with candidates' foreign credentials. Often, if the candidate is needed badly enough, the credentials will be taken at face value as long as they are accompanied by adequate evidence of practical experience. It is nevertheless in this situation that an employer would be most likely to use the services of a credentials assessment service, if one were available.

It is also in the case of these trades and similar uncertified occupations that employers have had to become most resourceful in developing assessment processes. Increasingly, among the most effective practices are PLAR-based approaches, two of which are described briefly below.

Aerospace firm, Manitoba

The Canadian shortage of aerospace workers has led the firm to implement a PLAR process to assess not candidates' paper qualifications, but their actual competences and abilities. Since 1997, the firm has used PLAR to assess the qualifications and experience of workers seeking employment in the firm in various technical categories, as well as employees seeking to move within the firm. Many of the skills used in other metalworking industries are transferable to aerospace. The approach can be used for both domestically- and foreign-trained candidates.

The firm thus does not place much importance on candidates' paper qualifications, but instead requires that they sit a hands-on assessment, with terminology, administered by a knowledgeable technical person. Based on this assessment, the decision can be made that the candidate is qualified/experienced enough for a position, or that more training in specific skills is needed. This training can then be arranged.

This PLAR process represents an innovative approach to credentials recognition, which reflects company requirements. Significantly, it rests not on assessment of paper qualifications, but on assessment of skills and competences.

Pulp and Paper firm, Saskatchewan

Through benchmarking competitors, the firm has identified 21 critical factors it feels its employees need to operate at the levels required of new competitive situations. Through an audit instrument, the firm assessed how its employees' skills compared to these 21 factors. In this, the firm used a PLAR approach to look at their in-plant training history, their experience in the firm, and, from individuals themselves, any other education, training and experience they had which might be relevant.

For each employee, a final picture was developed on skills possessed and skills lacking, in terms of the 21 factors. Training was set up to fill in the gaps.

Having developed this process for their own employees, the firm would use the same process in identifying and assessing the skill sets of a foreign-trained candidate. It would be transparent and even-handed. It also reflects directly the firm's skill needs. The key is the 21-factor standard, against which all candidates are assessed. In this situation, whether the credentials are foreign or not becomes unimportant.

A third example of innovative practice has been developed through a partnership between a metropolitan apartment builders association in Ontario and a local of the union which represents many workers in the sector, who are collaborating on a program to bring in workers for the local apartment building industry, on 2-year work visas. The program, which awaits approval from HRDC, intends to bring in 2000 workers annually for three

years, in the occupations of bricklaying, concrete forming, carpentry, and framing, and seeks to offset some of the skill shortages experienced and anticipated in these fields. None of these occupations are trades requiring compulsory certification.

The program relies on strong informal networks between workers in Canada and workers in their home countries. Potential participants in the program are identified through word-of-mouth contact, among other means, in the source countries. Workers in Canada from those countries, through their strong communication ties with their home countries, can pass along news about the program.

The potential workers are screened in their home countries, in a process that involves retired workers from the area who have returned to those countries. The skills sought have been carefully mapped out by the project partners, drawing on requirements drawn up for a potential apprenticeship program in Ontario. Standards are thus maintained, and potential workers must also have verifiable references.

Once in Canada, the workers are given training on occupational health and safety, as well as an orientation course and assistance in finding a place to live, etc. They are put directly to work after that.

The skills assessment process is one of the program's innovative features; screening in the home country will prevent poor choices which can be costly, and will also help prepare the prospective immigrants for the Canadian work situation.

4. Technical/Engineering

Engineering

Engineering services offered to the public often require a personal sign-off by an individual with a P. Eng. certification. Consultants who work directly for the public therefore often require that employees have a P. Eng. In industrial settings, however, unlicensed individuals can work under a P. Eng. and only the latter can sign off on work.

For individuals without a P. Eng., academic credentials and experience are often important in hiring decisions. One interviewee looked for a local university's evaluation of a candidate's credentials, and regards this as a basic condition of entry. In some cases, he also used his own informal network to check academic credentials (e.g. advice from a colleague who comes from the same country as a candidate and is knowledgeable about the institutions in that country.) Where a candidate's academic credentials fell short of provincial standards, he would look at hiring the candidate at a lower technical level in the firm.

Evaluating the candidate's work experience is more difficult. To be immediately productive, the candidate must usually have Canadian experience and a good capacity in English, as well as some familiarity with the culture of Canadian workplaces. Smaller firms often require that the candidate be able to get up to speed quickly, with knowledge of Canadian standards and codes, since they lack the capacity of a big firm to forego full productivity while the immigrant learns English.

In the minority of cases where a firm is hiring contract rather than permanent staff, the strict requirement is for someone who can be productive immediately, much like in the IT sector. As a result, there is less focus on the individual's paper credentials than on his/her specific related work experience. This is determined from a close reading of a resume, together with a screening interview.

Firms use interviews (often multiple interviews, some with the other employees the candidate will be working with) to assess the candidate's experience and, to an extent, paper qualifications. Experience is valued much more highly in these selections. Compatibility and 'fit' are also very important.

One interviewee who had used the assessment services of a local university anticipated that a new provincial credentials assessment service would be an improvement. He noted, however, that development of a single national database of institutions around the world, and a capacity to maintain that database, would do even better. He also noted that immigrant settlement services do not always give candidates the most accurate advice on how relevant their experience is, relative to Canadian needs, and this may create unrealistic expectations, which can lead to problems.

Turning to those candidates requiring a P. Eng., it was noted that provincial engineering accreditation organizations give this designation. Those from out of province must demonstrate their educational qualifications, first, then if these qualifications are acceptable, their experience.

One Ontario employer noted that the provincial engineering accreditation agency does not necessarily accept the academic credentials assessment provided by university services, but conducts its own. The employer noted that this assessment does not use a database, but rather depends on relationships with other similar organizations in other countries. In the employer's view, candidates from countries where there are such similar organizations (e.g. the U.S.) may thus have a greater chance of acceptance than candidates from countries where no such organizations exist. Following the establishment of a provincially-mandated credentials assessment agency in Ontario, it is not clear whether the provincial engineering accreditation agency will accept the agency's credentials assessments, or retain the right to conduct its own.

In the view of one informant, the provincial engineering certification body appears to use a spectrum of practices in checking the work experience of foreign-trained candidates. Candidates from some countries, such as the United States and Britain, whose academic and work experience credentials are deemed satisfactory, receive their P. Eng. with no exams. Other candidates whose academic credentials look acceptable but whose experience must be assessed are often required to write exams in key areas. Yet other candidates have no credentials recognized, and must write a full set of exams.

In the employer's view, this assessment process is so complex and time-consuming that frustration follows and immigrants never apply for their P. Eng. This limits their career prospects, and also their usefulness from an employer's perspective. Both suffer.

In the view of one informant, a conflict of interest results when the professional certifying bodies have both a responsibility for public safety and a duty to advocate and protect their members. Certification can be used to restrict entry into a profession. At the same time, certifying bodies have these responsibilities delegated to them by the province, which in theory can set the rules governing how these responsibilities are carried out. In the informant's view, this isn't happening.

Some concern was also expressed regarding the inaccurate assumptions many immigrants have about their ability to work in Canada. It was noted that the Immigration Department awards points by occupation, but does not account for the accrediting process the immigrant will encounter once in Canada. The Department must co-ordinate better with the accrediting agencies to pass information on certification processes to immigrants before they leave their home countries. An information website, accessible by immigrants before they leave for Canada, would work well.

Medical Laboratory Technology

Medical laboratory technologists require provincial certification, while medical laboratory technicians, who are unlicensed, require that employers develop procedures and practices in assessing foreign credentials. While these will likely vary by employer, one employer contacted noted that it tends to take foreign academic credentials at face value, since it has no other means of confidently assessing them.

The firm must therefore put a lot of stress on the interview process, together with a probationary period, to determine whether the individual is capable of doing the job required. It is also not usually practical to check international references. In a laboratory setting, there is risk and expense involved in this reliance on interviews/probation. It also means that the firm must take extra time and effort to train/orient the individual and monitor the individual's performance.

In the firm's view, a provincially-mandated credentials assessment service would help to position the candidate within its structure, with greater confidence. It would be better able to develop training programs appropriate to the individual's level, which would permit quicker, more efficient and less costly integration and development of the individual within the firm.

Environmental Technology

The Canadian Council for Human Resources in the Environment Industry (CCHREI) has actively developed the Environmental Services Practitioner certification, which focuses on what people do, rather then on what their degree is in. The Council has developed skill sets (core and related), occupational standards based on these, and a full certification process managed by an independent Canadian Environmental Certification Approval Board.

The certification process is electronic, and involves an individual voluntarily self-assessing against the occupational standards (in terms of the level of each skill he/she

possesses) and naming a 3rd party who can attest to that skill level. The attestation requirement means that the process is not instantaneous.

Whether or not an individual has a degree or diploma affects the level at which he/she is deemed to practice his/her environmental skills. The CCHREI therefore requires that foreign trained individuals have their credentials assessed by either the British Columbia or Alberta provincial assessment agencies.

For the foreign-trained, there will likely still be a requirement that they gain essential knowledge of various provincial legal aspects and environment-related codes. In addition, there may be a need to gain practical experience with technologies used in Canada but not in the individual's country of origin. A foreign-trained person can nevertheless self-assess and be granted Practitioner in Training status, able to work while they gain the needed Canadian knowledge, to the point where they can have a third party sign off that they have it. The process is thus inclusive rather than exclusive. Acquisition of the relevant Canadian knowledge can be done formally or informally. The means does not matter; the attested competency is the key result.

At the same time, the CCHREI feels that the certification practices of many professions are outdated, expensive, and require a huge staff to carry out. Its own electronic self-assessment approach, it feels, is a model for others, in that it involves much less time of both the candidate and the volunteers who carry out accreditation roles on behalf of certifying agencies. In recent research work, the CCHREI has concluded, having compared the three assessment methods (exam, observation, electronic self-assessment) that there is little to choose from in terms of quality of assessment, as long as the electronic self-assessment is based on accepted occupational standards.

5. Other Sectors

In a limited number of interviews, it was not possible to achieve comprehensive coverage of a wide variety of employers in various sectors. The following are the observations of interviewed employers in a selection of other sectors.

Retail banking

A retail banking recruiter indicated that her firm does not put too much emphasis on paper credentials, but usually follows a policy of taking these at face value. Part of the reason for this is because it has traditionally been so difficult to assess foreign degrees/diplomas.

The firm puts much more emphasis on past experience, particularly in sales/service, which it determines through a fairly extensive behavioural interview. In Canada, one needs a Canadian Mutual Funds License to sell these, and this is a requirement that applies to everyone.

The interviewee noted that if a provincial credentials assessment service were available, she would use it to get a better assessment of paper credentials than has been possible to date. It would expand her capacity to assess credentials.

Canadian Employers Meeting U.S. Requirements Under NAFTA

In a growing number of instances under NAFTA, Canadian employers seek to do work in the U.S. and wish to use foreign-trained employees from their Canadian operations in this work. In a number of instances, they find these workers' foreign credentials challenged at the border by American officials. These officials are enforcing that country's policy that incoming workers must demonstrate their qualifications for the job they will be filling, to ensure that an American citizen is not being displaced by an unqualified foreigner. In these cases, employers require an urgent review and assessment of the employee's foreign credentials.

V. Conclusions and Possible Future Directions

As noted above, conclusions based on a small number of interviews must be viewed as impressionistic, rather than definitive. Nevertheless, based on the work undertaken in this project, some broad directions for further action present themselves, as follows.

Further Research

A more extensive consultation with employers on credentials assessment issues would deepen governments' understanding not only of what the issues are, but of the breadth, depth, and details of employers' concerns. Such research might focus on the particular concerns of employers in specific sectors in which credentials assessment issues are a relative priority, and might be undertaken with the collaboration of the relevant sector employers' associations and/or sector councils, where appropriate. The research would be tailored to the specific concerns of the sector. Thus, for example, the thrust of an exploration of health sector employers' issues would differ from one that focused on industrial trades.

Identifying these sectors, however, might involve some initial broader-brush approaches, perhaps through provincial human resources professionals or recruiters' associations. In jurisdictions where credentials assessment services operate, these of course would be a primary source of information on employer contacts.

It is also clear that the intensity of further research on these issues will vary by region. Those jurisdictions with the highest immigrant flows will place a higher priority on exploring these questions than those which attract fewer immigrants.

Promotion of Provincial Credentials Assessment Agencies

In addition to, and in conjunction with, the research described above, there is a well-understood need for the provincial credentials assessment agencies to promote their services to the employer community, among their other client groups. The difficulties in doing this effectively – in 'getting employers' attention'-- should not be underestimated, if the experience of this project is in any way indicative. Broad-brush advertising may usefully be complemented by efforts to identify and engage those employer groups or sectors most likely to encounter credentials assessment issues.

It follows that the resources involved in these promotion efforts should also not be underestimated. Constant turnover among human resources professionals and recruiters in larger employers, and the continuing entry and exit of small businesses, mean that regular or even repetitive contacts are required. Targeting particular employer groups or sectoral associations may help with these costs, but does not remove the need for repetition.

Employer-Based Policy Advice

As has been noted, employers, for a variety of reasons, have not come forward in large numbers to provide advice to governments on credentials recognition policies or practices. As a whole, employers may not feel strongly enough about the subject, and (especially small employers) may not have the time to devote to consultations on these issues. Yet as skill shortages worsen and the need to use available skills most productively increases, the interests of employers in the effectiveness of credentials assessment and recognition processes should become more acute.

Governments are challenged to find a way to engage the employer community in discussions of these issues in a way which suits both. Further complicating the issue is the need to distinguish the credentials assessment issues from the other regulatory, administrative, and 'red tape' issues on which employers are often vocal.

It is not clear that ongoing, open-ended employer advisory groups will be attractive to potential employer participants. Rather, an approach, which is focussed on a problem that employers perceive to be real, and is finite in terms of time commitment, may stand a better chance of attracting participants. Soliciting the advice, assistance and nominations of employer organizations, on these terms, can facilitate the process.

Annex 1: Sectoral Distribution of Employers Interviewed During this Project

As noted in Section II of the report, broad-based approaches to identify potential interviewees proved much less successful than employing the contacts provided by immigration-related agencies. Since the majority of the agencies the researcher was able to identify, contact and secure further contacts from, were in Ontario, the majority of the interviews were carried out with Ontario firms.

A. Health Sector – 5 employers

B. High-Tech Sector – 4 employers

C. Construction/Manufacturing Trades – 6 employers, 1 union

D. Engineering/Technical – 5 employers

E. Other Sectors (Financial Services, etc.) – 2 employers

F. Other (Government, Provincial Credentials Assessment Agencies) – 4 organizations

Annex 2: Other Organizations Consulted/Contacted During the Project

Immigration lawyers in Fredericton and Winnipeg

Human Resources Associations in Nova Scotia, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Ontario and British Columbia.

Local Chapters of the HRPAO in Barrie, Halton, West Toronto, York, Quinte, Peterborough, Kingston, Guelph, Niagara, Sarnia, Toronto, Ottawa and Hamilton.

Human Resources Management Association of Edmonton

Hamilton Chamber of Commerce Human Resources Committee

Canadian Association of Professional Recruiters

Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities

Pollack Group

Catholic Immigrant Settlement, Ottawa

Manitoba Aerospace Human Resources Co-ordinating Committee

Skills For Change, Toronto

Maytree Foundation, Toronto

World Education Services, Toronto

Annex 3: The Perspective of Credentials Assessment Services

Early in the project, representatives of the credentials assessment services in Alberta and British Columbia were interviewed, as part of the process of drafting the interview protocol to be used in the main body of the interviews. These agencies have developed a very good understanding of the issues, which are important to their employer clients, as well as a clear view of the importance of publicizing their services to employers and other client groups. The main themes of these interviews with provincial credentials assessment agencies are presented below, to complement those from the interviews with employers themselves.

Credentials assessment services note that despite their efforts to publicize themselves, the majority of employers are unaware of the existence of their service. Many employers, unaware of the availability of such a service in their province, have simply developed their own practices and procedures, which many admit are costly and time-consuming.

Credentials assessment agencies note three important requirements of the employers they deal with, as follows:

Timeliness is a key concern. Assessments from credentials assessment services typically take two weeks, although for a higher fee they can be conducted in a week. Some services provide even more rapid verbal assessments, followed up later in writing.

Cost is a second consideration for employers. Credentials assessment services structure their fee schedule to cover costs with a small markup, and feel that their services are cost-effective. Often, the cost takes the form of employer resources used to manage and monitor the credentials assessment process for several prospective employees. Here, employers may put the onus back on the individuals themselves to secure the assessments.

Bona fide credentials are necessary. Implicit in all employers' assessment requests, but explicit in some, is the assurance that credentials are valid. Credentials assessment organizations also provide authentication services.

Credentials assessment services are aware of employers' needs, and have taken steps to address these. Key issues to be addressed, and approaches to be considered, include the following:

1. Employer awareness

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to use of their services is a lack of employer awareness. This can take the form of simple lack of employer knowledge that the services exist, to, for some employers, a skepticism about the effectiveness of a government-run or -sponsored service. The services have undertaken a number of different approaches to the employer community, including workshops, brochures, and information sessions. These have been organized with various employer organizations including provincial human resources associations, etc.

Turnover of HR people in larger firms, however, means that they are continually required to repeat these publicity initiatives. Among smaller firms where there is no specific HR function, it is hard to determine whom to approach with publicity. Publicity resources constitute an ongoing issue for the credentials assessment services.

2. Speed and focus of assessments

There is a continuing need to improve the speed of credentials assessments, and their focus on satisfying employer requirements for length and relevance. The assessment services work on these constantly.

The assessment services recognize, however, that it is often not enough to simply look at paper credentials when assessing the qualifications of an immigrant candidate. The individual's work and life experience may also provide additional relevant capability to meet Canadian requirements. Thus, the potential role of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) processes in credentials assessment is one that may be underdeveloped at present.

3. Self-Assessment

The credentials assessment agencies note that, in a fundamental sense, the most efficient credentials assessment process, from an employer viewpoint, is one that is completed before the candidate applies for a job. As noted above, many individuals seek these assessments at their own expense before applying for Canadian jobs.

In this context, credentials assessment agencies recognize that a very important means of speeding up the assessment process is for the individual to do it him/herself. There are several experiments in which information has been made available through the Internet to individuals in certain professions, to permit such a self-assessment. By avoiding having to use the credentials assessment service at all, the individual achieves a timely and cost-effective result.

Such Internet-based services tend to be available for immigrants to use once they are in Canada. Extending these to permit their use by immigrants before they come to Canada would add further to the effectiveness of these services.

Annex 4. The Interview Protocol — Themes Covered

1. Firm data – Size, sector, extent/frequency and circumstances of experience with recruiting workers with foreign credentials.

2. Nature of firm's experience with recruitment of workers with foreign credentials:

   - Occupations normally recruited through this channel, and importance/role of credentials assessment in recruiting these occupations.

   - Labour market or other circumstances leading the firm to look at foreign-trained workers (ideally, these should not be special circumstances, but simply a normal part of the recruitment process).

   - An action taken to assess foreign credentials (provincial assessment agency, immigration lawyer investigation, and involvement of provincial professional or technical regulatory body, other) and reasons for choosing this process.

   - Most recent or most frequent experience in this recruitment.

3. Extent of employer's prior awareness of credentials assessment resources and services; how employer learned about these services and decided how to proceed.

4. Observations on the credentials assessment process used:

   i. Timeliness of assessment results;
   ii. Cost and employer's resources required;
   iii. Eventual success in hiring the foreign-trained worker(s);
   iv. Adequacy of a process focusing exclusively on 'paper' credentials and not work/life experience;
   v. Perceived procedural or other barriers in the process and how they were addressed;
   vi. Other observations.

5. Identification of specific means by which the process might be improved. Specific comments on:

   i. Potential role of Internet-based self-assessment resources;
   ii. Specific improvements required in the services of provincial credentials assessment agencies;
   iii. Means/strategies for improving employers' awareness of credentials assessment services;
   iv. Importance of expanded Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) processes in enhancing credentials recognition;
   v. Specific actions by governments, which might support needed improvements in these processes.